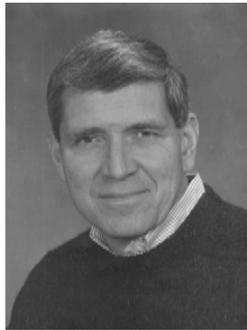


Leadership Lessons in Following *Learning from the Writings of Dallas Willard*

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In 1998, I was in the early years of a third career when I read Dallas Willard's *Divine Conspiracy*. My new field of work aimed to use my leadership background and training to develop servant leaders in public service and in the church, but I seemed to be missing something. I knew a lot about *what* it takes to be a leader—mostly learned through my experiences of stumbling—and yet so little about *how* to help younger people actually become wise leaders.



Ray Blunt

The issue of shaping character has, to a lesser or greater extent, always been a vexing question. More than anything else, people follow what they see as the heart, that quality in leaders which makes them, as C.S. Lewis wrote, “men with chests.” Character in leaders, then, is *the* central issue.

I came to recognize one clear truth about character formation: It takes a leader to grow a leader—but, inevitably, a good leader must first be a follower.

As I wrestled with these ideas and how to use these insights to help others, I came across a piece on *The Divine Conspiracy* and its emphasis on discipleship. The disciple, Willard wrote, is one who follows and learns. The more I read, the more I began to connect the dots between discipleship and leadership.

This helpful insight spurred my interest in reading more of Willard's writings. I now have four of Willard's books, *Hearing God* and *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, the two that preceded *The Divine Conspiracy* as part of his trilogy, and the one that followed, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ*. Each is excellent in its own way; however, I most often recommend *The Divine Conspiracy*, since I have found it to be the most valuable in my life.

There are the two insights that continue to strike me as most relevant—and breathtaking. First is the

understanding that the evangelical church's message has been diluted through its misperception of the Matthew 28 Great Commission as a call to “make converts.” I found myself saying “Yes!” when Willard pointed out that Jesus calls those who follow him to go and make disciples, not simply converts. For me, that was no small distinction. Followers are called to help grow other followers, those who follow, not the leader, but The Leader. This is not simply a changed point of view, but a call to believe and to act, a call for servant leaders to grow other servant leaders.

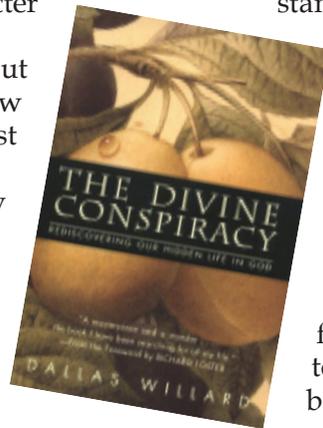
The second insight that continues to inform my life and work is that followers of Jesus are called not simply to follow his *teachings*, but to also look at *how he lived* his life on this earth. Again, that seems a small distinction in some ways, but it had huge implications for me. Two examples come to mind.

Jesus, perfect God/man that he was, walked in constant contact with the One he followed—his Father.

He also took huge chunks of time to go alone to the mountains to pray. This shaping discipline of taking some significant time to pray was one that I never really thought was within my reach as busy as I was. But, I realized that my agenda was neither at the same intensity of engagement as Jesus', nor was my hourglass running as swiftly as was his. Jesus didn't just teach his followers what to pray—a subject I had tried to study diligently—they asked about prayer, because they saw what he did. Although still a work in progress, the notion of blocking significant time to pray alone in a solitary place

and beginning to practice the presence of God have done more to make a difference for me than all of my studying over the years about prayer.

The second example is what, for me, I see as the heart of the message: Jesus' whole “strategy,” the bull's-eye of the divine conspiracy, was to be a servant leader who grew a few servant leaders around him and then entrusted the succession of the responsibility of the mission to them—and to the power of the coming Holy Spirit within them.



As I thought about how I might have tackled his mission, I realized he understood more than anyone how a leader takes a vision, embeds it in the lives of others, and helps equip them to be the people to carry it on to ultimate fruition. He used stories to teach truths, not simply laying down a theological system or a series of “steps,” and his own life was the real story—washing feet before he goes to the ultimate battle; laughing at the table with good friends, food, and drink; and, most significantly, the story we retell each Eucharist, his willingly dying for others.

I found this means of life-shaping echoed in Jim Houston’s teaching on mentoring. He emphasizes the understanding of mentoring not being a “method” but a “way of life,” deeply reinforcing the understanding of Jesus’ life as his primary teaching.

Now, as I try to teach and mentor others, Jesus’ example as a teacher, mentor, and coach of future leaders is one I return to again and again. Willard’s books have been a significant help in this regard.

On the surface, the leadership vision Willard describes is, it seems, so much smaller, less compelling, and even less immediate than the grand visions of the great corporations—and even many of the great churches. In the case of consumer-driven corporations and churches, the emphasis on meeting people’s expressed and ever-changing needs and on producing large-sized results seems to be the alternative, competing story to Christ’s vision for discipleship focussing on a few.

The patient, persistent cultivation of character and the investment of one’s life in a few of those coming behind—“the long obedience in the same direction”—through time-tested and exemplified discipline has proven to be a far more powerful and enduring vision and strategy than that of the cover story leaders. Sadly, most of them fail to finish well; they are not “built to last.” History shows this all too well. Enduring results come more from persistence on the few, “small” efforts of cultivating relationships and living obediently than from the larger, spectacular visions for transformation of culture and organizations commonly espoused today. “The divine conspiracy” was also the divine vision and strategy for transforming the world, and I believe Willard nails it.

The radical truth of Philippians 2:5-11 remains, for me, both the mindset and the example of the heart of wisdom I want to possess and to be my legacy at the end of the day. Those lessons will stand the test of time, and Dallas Willard has pulled them straight from the life of the Person I want to follow and learn from most.

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